Crafting Prose

Don Richard Cox • Elizabeth Giddens

Preface

    Crafting Prose assumes that the aims of discourse are far more important than the modes of discourse. It obviously owes much to the work of James Kinneavy, whose book, *A Theory of Discourse* (1971), revised the way many people think about discourse in general and writing in particular. We have generally adopted Kinneavy's premises about the *writer-reader-reality* triangle (which he labels the *encoder-decoder-reality* triangle), and about the kinds of writing that an emphasis on each component of that triangle generates. We have modified the titles of these aims of discourse slightly from Expressive, Persuasive, and Referential to Expressive, Persuasive, and Informative. We have also omitted entirely the category of literary discourse (which emphasizes, according to Kinneavy, the *signal*), on the admittedly somewhat arbitrary grounds that most college English departments shunt "literary" or "creative" writing off to other courses. In going along with this convention of viewing creative writing as a discipline unto itself, we are not necessarily disagreeing with Kinneavy's assumptions, but instead are simply conforming to the practice most commonly found in classrooms.

    Using these aims of discourse as an organizing principle, we have divided the book into four major sections — an Introduction, devoted to the principle elements of composition, and three remaining sections — Crafting Expressive Prose, Crafting Informative Prose, and Crafting Persuasive Prose. We allow for some degree of overlap within these divisions and understand that these aims are seldom, if ever, found in completely pure forms. In our Introduction we assume that most instructors will wish to instill a sense of composition's basic elements — invention, composing, and revision — right away. That is, instructors will not want to spend several weeks on invention alone and leave revision for the distant future, because students usually need to be writing complete compositions in the first weeks of a term. We include several workable heuristics in the Introduction, but touch on other invention strategies and heuristics later. We focus here on the *process* of writing. Although the debate between emphasizing process or product in a writing class would seem to have been declared a victory for the process approach years ago, simply subscribing to a "process approach" does not completely explain all the strategies that one may employ in the classroom.

    The remaining three divisions of the text move beyond the basic elements of teaching writing as process to present the three fundamental aims of discourse — expressive, informative, and persuasive writing. Within each section we provide a general introduction discussing the basic principles of that specific aim, followed by readings that demonstrate these principles. Persuasive prose is probably the most familiar of these aims to many teachers, for the argumentative essay is generally the staple of most college composition classes. Traditionally, expressive and informative prose have played lesser roles, with expressive prose sometimes being encouraged with the assignment of journals or freewriting exercises and informative prose occasionally touched on in the context of research writing. We contend that these two major aims — expressive and informative prose — also have their place in textbooks and in the classroom, and within these sections (as within the section on persuasive prose) we have purposely chosen a wide variety of readings and have avoided selecting only those pieces that might fit into the traditional "essay" format. These readings, which represent a broad spectrum of writing tasks drawn from all three realms of discourse, provide students not so much with "models," at least

as the term is most narrowly construed, but with representative samples of the many possibilities that exist in the universe of discourse.

We hope that students will use these readings to guide and shape their own compositions and, more inportant, allow these authors to expand their perception of what constitutes good writing. By including these representative samples and by asking students to write similar pieces, we hope to broaden a sense of discourse and make their freshman English writing more relevant to their writing in their other college classes and to their lives after college. In that world they may be called on to draft expressive or informative prose as frequently as, if not more frequently than, they will create purely persuasive prose. Although we do not necessarily intend this book to be a writing-across-the-curriculum text, it accepts some of the premises of that movement, because it attempts to expand the boundaries of what students traditionally write and read in college English classes and reflect a larger view of the universe of discourse than one usually finds in more traditional texts.

We structured *Crafting Prose* to present the aims of discourse in an order that gradually becomes more difficult for students. The movement from expressive prose to informative prose to persuasive prose, however, follows what we believe is also an appropriately "natural" progression. Students seem to write most easily about themselves, find it slightly more difficult to report on the world around them, and have the most difficulty persuading others of the validity of their opinions. The problems students encounter as they work their way through this progression may suggest to teachers that they should not devote equal amounts of class time to each of the three aims of discourse. Although that may be the case, we caution against omitting any section entirely. Certainly, because crafting clear and coherent persuasive prose is difficult for most students, it makes sense to allot a substantial portion of the academic term to dealing with this aim and devote less of the term to other aims. In the not-too-distant past, as Janet Emig's landmark study *The Composing Process of Twelfth Graders* (1971) attests, students felt far less comfortable with personal, subjective, or "reflexive" writing than they did with more distanced, objective or "extensive" prose. That situation has changed somewhat (partly, no doubt, as a result of Emig's book), but because the pendulum of pedagogical theory constantly swings back and forth, we cannot assume that any group of sudents will enter the college classroom already skilled in, and comfortable with, any form, genre, or aim of discourse.

Finally, a comment on *modes* of discourse. In differentiating between *modes* and *aims* of discourse, we make what we believe is an absolutely crucial distinction. Traditionally, a mode of discourse is a *format* or *form*. Comparison/Contrast, for example, is a format in which material can be presented. It is not, however, an aim or goal of discourse. To teach writing by emphasizing the modes of discourse over the goals or aims of discourse severely distorts the nature of the task at hand. Such an approach produces assignments in which students are asked to present the format first and ignore the purpose or use of the material they are creating. Frequently students create "correct" prose that satisfies the assignment, but prose that, beyond that assignment, has no real reason for existing. Focusing primarily on modes suggests that formats are an end in themselves, rather than a means to an end. It is the end — the goal, the aim — of a piece of prose that deserves the emphasis and focus. For this reason we wish to place the *function* or purpose of the prose first, the format or mode of the discourse second. For this reason, for example, descriptive prose is a form found within the section on Crafting Expressive Prose. Descriptive prose is not an end in itself, because, except in some college English classes, writers do not sit down with the intention of simply writing a narrative or a description; they begin with the goal of expressing themselves, or informing a reader, or persuading an

audience. Similarly, it is also misleading simply to ask students to do an "interview" assignment, as though the point of the exercise is again its overall form or structure. Before a writer decides to do an interview, something in the relationship of writer, reader, and subject, something within the context of the communicative situation, should suggest that an interview would be the most appropriate format to choose. Form (or format) should follow function. Sometimes, of course, a piece of prose may have more than one function, more than one purpose, so we therefore include a number of questions within each section, questions students should use to guide them towards defining their aims, their goals, and, at times, their formats. Overall, we contend, this system of focusing on function first, rather than form, produces far better and more significant prose, and ultimately creates far better crafters of that prose.

We agree with Donald Murray, who, in *A Writer Teaches Writing*, argues for open assignments rather than closed ones, asserting that with open assignments students "will make their own discoveries — they will think — and they will discover a voice that is appropriate to them, to the subject, and to their own audience." Stressing format over function will not allow this creative process to take place.

All books owe much to others. Clearly we owe a debt to many theorists and practitioners. James Kinneavy we have mentioned; Donald Murray also needs to be singled out as a major influence. Other theorists we attempt to acknowledge in the course of the book; like Tennyson's Ulysses we have become "a part of all [we] have met." Beyond these theorists who have taught us, we are grateful to our many students, who, though unnamed, through their queries and insights have forced us to make decisions and judgments about what we in turn advocate and believe. Five of these students — Mary Rhea, Greg Maine, Sybil Adams, Bill Estep, and Dwayne Ferrell — do need to be singled out for their specific contributions to this book. We would like to thank Joseph Trahern and Edward Bratton for their support and encouragement over the past several years, as well as colleagues such as Donald Ploch, Richard Kelly, B. J. Leggett, Tom Wheeler, Sandra Ballard, Karen Sprague, and Bonnie Winsbro, who have provided us with insights, information, criticisms, and speculations. Thanks also to Donita Owings, Donna Giddens, Michael, Vickie, Steve, Patsy, Dawn, Andrea, and Woody for their particular contributions during the writing process. We are also indebted to Judith G. Gardner, University of Texas at San Antonio; Peter Goodrich, University of Northern Michigan; Mary Sue MacNealy, Memphis State University; and Richard J. Zbaracki, Iowa State University, for reviewing our manuscript.

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Don Richard Cox
Elizabeth J. Giddens

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INTRODUCTION

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UNDERSTANDING THE TASK

Writing is complex. This announcement may not be news, but sometimes an obvious statement deserves contemplation, unpacking. First we have to decide what we actually mean by that overwhelming, ominous noun — "writing." Do we mean handwriting or typing? Or are we referring to the words that a somewhat nervous and tentative author, businessperson, or student scrawls across a page, onto a grocery list, or into a love letter? Could we also mean the complicated and occasionally inexplicably odd system of grammar and good use that makes up what English teachers call Standard English? What about the whole routine of gathering up the right pen and the right kind of paper, finding a quiet corner in a library, and then settling in to think about something — a topic, a point of concern, or doubt — and trying, just trying, to put those thoughts down in sentences so that you don't forget them and maybe even so someone else can read them? Is that writing?

What if, just to be generous, we allow that writing is all of these things — and more. We've said nothing so far about making outlines, fulfilling assignments, conducting interviews, reading expert sources, analyzing others' arguments. These activities could be writing too, because they could be, and often are, included in the act of writing. Perhaps, then, it's best for us to think about writing as both a thing you do — a process — and a thing you create — a product like a finished letter, a newspaper story, a book review, or a personal essay.

Also, if the goal of writing is to communicate something to someone, whether it be in an exam, a letter of complaint, a proposal for a new traffic light, or a diary written only for your older self to read years from now, then writing encompasses much more than just the process and the eventual product; it includes a concern for surrounding events, situations, and human relationships. The people involved, the places they live and work, their opinions of the writer and the cause she represents, the time of day and season of the year, all influence a writer and what she writes.

No wonder we find writing hard! No wonder we squirm a little when we know we're going to have to write several essays, term papers, or lab reports in a class.

Writing is complex, and for most of us writing takes time, energy, and concentration. It's harder than thinking and much less natural than speaking. It's governed by legions of rules, some of which are unspoken, unwritten, and even unknown.

What to do? Panic, of course, is an option. But you have other options as well, and they are healthier; sometimes these options can even be fun. Mostly, we have to breathe deeply and take a logical tack: practice, get advice, rework drafts, polish, and send writing out to be read. In short, we learn a writing process that helps us produce sentences that make sense to ourselves and to our readers. The central tenets of this textbook are that (1) writing comprises both a product and a process, and (2) all writing involves a series of choices. In this book we will try to make you aware of many of the choices you will face when you write, and we will attempt to give you the skills and confidence to make those choices well.

The first step is to think for a minute about the factors relevant to any writing task: a writer, a reader, the world or environment influencing the writer and reader, and finally the text, the written piece itself that mediates between the other three factors. Many people find it helpful to visualize these factors and their relationships by thinking of the writing triangle. It looks like this:

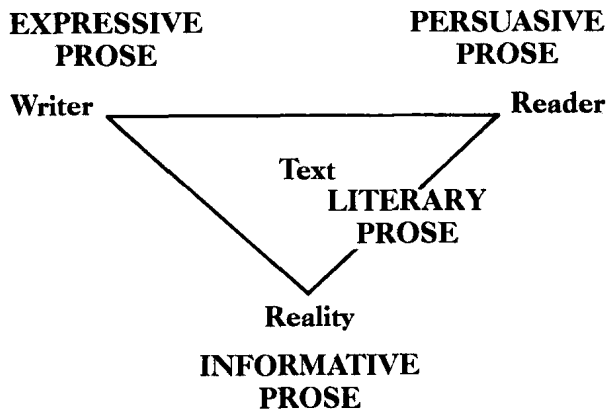**Writer** _____ **Reader**
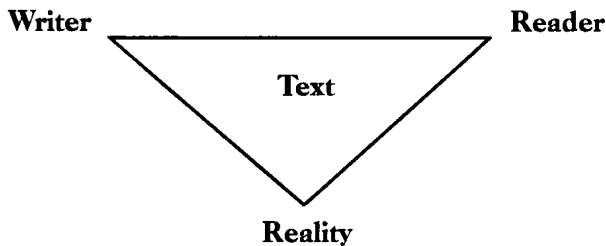
Text

Reality

This diagram clearly shows that writer, reader, and reality all influence the text; in other words, a writer produces a text, the reader reads it, and reality gives it a meaningful context. Further, without any one of these factors, we would not really have a writing situation; the factors are interdependent. (Some of you might suggest that a reader is not always required, say, for instance, if you write in a diary. But we would argue that a reader is required, even if the writer becomes her own reader.)

Nevertheless, we should not take this interdependence of factors too far; although all of them are present to some degree in every writing situation, quite often one of these factors is more important than the other two. In many writing situations one factor is the star, the focus; it is under the spotlight and the others, still present, are waiting in the wings, never quite offstage. For example, if the writer puts herself under the spotlight in order to tell a story about a personal experience, the goal of the written text is her self-expression and revelation. She finds her material for writing in her own past or in her thoughts. Her writing process is largely guided by an effort to recreate an experience or explain something about herself. Sure, she's somewhat concerned about her readers' reactions and expectations; she has to produce a written artifact that accurately gets her meaning across, and the experiences she describes and the thoughts she explains must have some

connection to reality to have meaning. But all the same, the focus is on herself. So she approaches writing with an effort to reveal herself and thus de-emphasizes her concern for the other factors (reader, reality, and text).

In short, this writer decides on a basic goal for her project by emphasizing her own desire to express herself. And that goal determines at least some, if not most, of the choices she makes as she writes. Starting off with one goal in mind is a useful, manageable concept. A goal gives some rough, embryonic shape to a writing project, and it can help you see which options are relevant to a particular project. We encourage you to use a goal as a point of departure in your writing, but not to cling to this goal too tightly. A goal will give you a rough sense of direction, a general sense of purpose; it's meant to fit loosely and comfortably, like an old sweatshirt (which is also a good thing to wear when you write).

It's possible to emphasize each of the four factors of the writing triangle, thus creating four basic goals that encompass all writing. This illustration demonstrates these relationships:

**EXPRESSIVE   PERSUASIVE
PROSE   PROSE**

Writer_____**Reader**

**Text
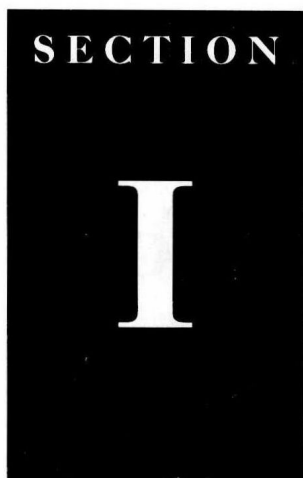LITERARY
PROSE**

**Reality
INFORMATIVE
PROSE**

An emphasis on the writer, then, produces *expressive prose*; emphasis on reality makes for *informative prose*; focus on the reader creates *persuasive prose*; and stress on the text results in *literary prose* (which is not covered in this book, but is covered in other courses, usually under the label of *creative writing*). For example, a letter from a friend describing his first calamitous attempt at windsurfing would be *expressive*; a magazine article explaining how to buy the best windsurfing board for the money would be *informative*; an advertisement or brochure selling a particular brand of windsurfing board would be *persuasive*; and a story that vividly re-creates the experience of windsurfing, transforming that experience into a symbol of freedom, would be *literary*. Although the subjects in these four texts are related, the writers' purposes are quite distinct. Furthermore, it's easy to see that the letter writer, the reporter, the advertiser, and the artist would make vastly different decisions about how to research their projects and how to write their texts. Consequently, you can see how a goal can affect the way you go about writing a specific piece.

The first section of the book introduces the basic process common in all writing, so that you can find some useful suggestions to help you design your own process. The three subsequent sections contain advice for expressive, informative, and persuasive writing. They will help you adapt your process to specific goals. At the end of each of these sections, you will find readings illustrating the three goals; they have been chosen to illustrate the range of writing purposes available to you as well as the options all writers have. You may get some ideas from them; you may just enjoy reading them. We hope they will help you see that good writing takes many diverse forms. One last point: Despite this notion of different goals in writing, it's important to recognize that your writing purposes may overlap. Remember that even though one factor is spotlighted, the others remain onstage. This notion of overlap, of degree, should help you remain aware of the complexity and interrelatedness of all writing goals. The readings, as you will see, further attest to this overlap. Enjoy them, and yourself, as you progress through the book.

SECTION

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Crafting Prose